

## **Simeon, Anna and the Baby Jesus – Luke 2:22-40**

**January 14, 2024**

This morning I would like to acknowledge a message spoken some years ago by John Braun who was then the pastor of the Charleswood Mennonite Church in Winnipeg. He spoke about this passage from Luke 2 and I have adapted and used a number of his ideas.

Most Christmas pageants focus on the principal characters of the nativity story, an innocent Mary, a bewildered Joseph, awestruck shepherds, visiting magi and a sleeping baby Jesus. Beyond that have you ever seen a play or a movie of the Christmas story that includes Simeon and Anna, the two Jewish intercessors who prophesied over Jesus a few days after his birth?

Jesus grew up in a family that meticulously observed the law of Moses. In his account Luke tells us no fewer than five times that they did everything required in the law. There was the purification of the mother, 40 days after the birth of a male child. There was dedication of the first-born son to God. A sacrifice of a lamb or pigeon was required. If people could not afford this then a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons would suffice.

While they were there they are met by Simeon. Perfect timing. Inspired by the Spirit. He knew Jesus was coming. The Holy Spirit had told him he wouldn't die until he saw the Messiah. So here is an elderly man looking to the future. It seems most often that elderly people are accused of living in the past, or of being relics of a bygone age that is no longer relevant. But this story does not fit that stereotype. This man is forward looking at the very moment that he is ready to die. He is keeping his eyes open for the presence of the Messiah in the world. The Holy Spirit inspires him to come to the temple where he sees Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus. It must have been a moving scene. An elderly man now ready to die holding a six-week-old child. He takes the baby in his arms and blesses God saying, "Lord now you are dismissing your servant in peace for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

As soon as Simeon had said this an elderly prophet Anna comes onto the scene. These two aged saints are Israel in miniature and Israel at its best. Devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the temple, longing and hoping for the fulfillment of God's promises. When Anna sees the infant Jesus, she praises God and begins to speak of the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel. She is engaged in conversation, not about the things of the past, but about the future. She fosters hope for the world.

Two elderly people, both looking forward to the redemption of Israel and the inclusion of the Gentiles. It is a picture of hope at the very end of a lifetime. You wouldn't think this would be the case but it was.

Probably not long after the birth of Jesus both Simeon and Anna died. We now look back over more than 2000 years on the life of Jesus himself. To us it is the ancient past and many in our

world dismiss that ancient past and that ancient person Jesus as irrelevant in a world that thinks new thoughts.

In our world things are quickly outdated and cast aside. We live in the midst of a throw away culture. You don't fix. You get new. You don't really build things to last since that isn't good for the economy. We live for the moment and in the moment. Advertising reflects the outlook that we need to keep the old and the new separate. What is new is considered so only for a brief time and then it becomes outdated, discarded in favor of an updated version.

Yet there is something intriguing about a 90- year-old person cradling a newborn child. Somehow it elongates our view of the present moment and it enriches our view of the past and the future, letting us know that these perspectives of time are really all interwoven.

How do you define the present and the past? In the afternoon when you look back on something like this worship service which happened in the morning, is that the past already or is it still in the present?

Author John Paul Lederach suggests we could think of the present as covering a much longer span of time than just a few moments or a few days or even a few years. Think of the oldest hand that touched your hand when you were very young. How old was that person; maybe 80-90 years old? Now if you think of yourself as an 80-90- year- old, think of the youngest hand that you have touched. Imagine that that youngster will live to be 80-90. Lederach claims that the birth year of the oldest person your hand has touched and the death of the youngest person that same hand of yours will touch, that is the span of the present. John Braun says the oldest hand that grasped his hand was his great-grandmother who was born in 1866. If John lives to be 80 and then grasps the hand of a toddler who lives to be 85, that will be the year 2120, a span of 254 years. That's how long Lederach suggests the present lasts.

This seems rather ludicrous to the ears that think of yesterday as the past. What a different way of looking at time. Our lives are touched by both the very young and the very old. That is our present.

Yet we live in a world that stratifies the generations; baby boomers, Gen X, Z, millennials. Never should they meet. But think of how your life, your present has been and is enriched and expanded by relating and loving the very young and the elderly. It is one thing that gives us an identity and a memory to anchor ourselves, as well as a future with hope.

Simeon and Anna were two elderly people who were filled with a profound sense of hope for the future. We rob ourselves when we look at a wrinkled elderly face and think of words like obsolete, irrelevant and antiquated. And we rob ourselves when we look at an infant or toddler and think they will be fully developed humans one day and then we can relate to them on a serious level.

It seems like the story of Simeon and Anna meeting the infant Jesus tells us that the present is much longer than we may think. This meeting is all the more intriguing because Jesus was given

into the world by God who is the source and end of all things. Jesus himself is referred to as the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. He is the one of whom the doxology says, "For from him and through him and to him are all things."

The story of Simeon and Anna also tells us in a subtle way that the human race is not doomed to time as an ever-repeating, never-ending cycle. Both Simeon and Anna had a memory, not only their own but also the memory of their people, the memory of Israel's faith and how God related to them as a people.

In addition to memory, they also had hope. Even though they were elderly and about to die they did not think of that as the end of the story. Their hope was placed in the faith that this young child would grow up not only to make a big difference for the future of their people but it also included the hope that the Christ child would somehow be a light for the whole world.

It takes memory and hope to have a story, not a story that keep repeating itself, but a story that develops, changes, grows and moves toward a goal. It is a story where the past and the present and the future are all connected. The story of Jesus is a story that begins in God and ends in God. The story of Jesus will gather up the stories of all people and all nations, and make them part of God's story of creation, redemption and recreation. That's the story towards which the Bible points. That's how time is being filled with meaning, purpose and hope.

The prophet Isaiah often talks about the Day of the Lord (Isaiah 34:4). It is not a day the way we think of it, 24 hours. It is the kind of event where the story of creation, the story of the nations and the story of individuals will finally come to a conclusion. Isaiah says the skies will roll up like a scroll. Imagine that.

The writer of the book of Revelation picks up on this image in talking about the end of time. The apostle John speaks about the sky vanishing like a scroll rolling up (Revelation 6:14). This picture of creation includes time itself rolling up like a scroll. A scroll is a long piece of parchment or paper on which you write a story. At the end of the story, you roll up the scroll. You start rolling the scroll at the end of the story and you work your way back to the beginning of the story. The end is in the beginning. The past is revisited as you roll up the scroll. The judgment and redemption of all time takes place when the scroll of time and the story of creation are rolled up from the end to the beginning.

So, the past matters. It matters that people lived in the past. Even though we have long forgotten many things of the past, these things will all be revisited. In that way the past becomes the future again. The story of Simeon and Anna points in that direction. That's quite likely why they have so much hope at the end of their lives when they see the Ancient of Days as a newborn child in the arms of his parents. "We can depart in peace for our eyes have seen God's salvation, a light to all nations and a glory for the ancient people of Israel," Luke 2:29-32.

However, there is one more piece to this story. What we don't see in the midst of this scene of jubilation in the temple are the decades of painful groaning that these saints lived through. The joyful moment of Jesus' birth did not come without a price.

God's promises, like the birth of children, require a gestation period, an agonizing season of waiting. Most people in the Bible who claimed big promises did not get instant, microwave answers. Like the childless Hannah, or the heirless Abraham or the imprisoned Paul, they travailed. And waited. And travailed some more.

In the animal kingdom, big creatures often have the longest gestation periods. A baby whale is in its mother's womb for 18 months, a baby giraffe waits 15 months. Some species of elephants are pregnant for 22 months. After that they give birth to a newborn which weighs up to 600 pounds. That tells us that if we are carrying a big promise, we should be prepared to wait. During this waiting period it is often the case that we may be confused, irritable, restless. There are feelings of desperation in our walk of faith, often accompanied by temptations of doubt. Did God really promise that? Everything inside of us sometimes wants to quit believing.

I'm quite sure that Simeon and Anna considered quitting during their years of prayer. The headlines in Jerusalem were depressing. The economy was awful. The political situation was demoralizing. Yet these two faithful prayer warriors didn't go into retirement. They found the grace to press on. Though their hands grew feeble, their faith grew strong.

Finally, the day dawned, the time was fulfilled when they not only witnessed the Christmas miracle, they also got to hold the baby Jesus in their arms. What a moment. Our eyes will someday see the fulfillment of God's salvation. In the meantime, we are called to follow Jesus, in order to begin to make sense of a story we do not yet completely know. We are part of this story. So are the generations long past and those in the distant future. I pray that the faith of Simeon and Anna will inspire us to hold tightly to all God has promised us. Amen.

Benediction: Romans 15:13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Lord bless you and keep you this day and always. Amen.